

## **Potterspury Annual Parish Assembly**

**2023**

### **Report from West Northants Councillor**

We are coming to the end of the second year of West Northants Council, and it can best be described as one of consolidation. The 2022/23 financial year is expected to end with a small underspend, whilst a balanced budget for 2023/24 has been agreed. This position has been achieved by keeping strict control of costs, particularly staff, and by increasing both council tax and other council charges such as parking in Northampton, and green bins.

For the South Northants area, the increase in council tax has been above the average for the Council, due to progressive harmonisation across the council, but 2023/24 is the last year of harmonization and future increases will be common to all areas.

Despite increasing interest rates, the Council's debt is not a particular cause for concern, as most of the debt is long-term at fixed rates, and if inflation has an up side it is in decreasing the significance of debt.

The outturn for 2023/24 is of course exposed to 'events' and particularly to demand-led services such as Childrens and Social Care, where we simply have to pay what is needed, and the long-term effects on demand of Covid are still emerging.

Planning Services have been a cause for concern in the last year, with loss of staff and consequent delays to decisions. However. Recruitment has been ongoing, and new staff joining the council, as well as those promoted internally, appear to be of a high quality. Cllr Pritchard and I both sit on the local area Planning Committee, and Cllr Pritchard also sits on the Strategic Planning committee. Particularly for the local area committee, we have been exercising our powers of call-in with more alacrity of late! A significant task has been migrating the systems of each legacy council onto a new integrated WNC system, but this is expected to be completed in June.

I want to draw to your attention the consultation on the boundary review for WNC. Under the proposal, Deanshanger ward is reduced slightly in scope with Ashton and Whittlebury moving to other wards and will have two rather than three councillors as a result.

You may have heard that the Northamptonshire Children's Trust fostering service has been described as 'inadequate' by Ofsted. NCT is an independent body, serving both West and North Northants, but we are of course concerned in the service it delivers to our residents. The leaders of both councils have been working together to press for improvements.

A decision on the AL5 (Furtho Pit) development is expected within two months. The current state of play with other proposed development sites is:

#### **AL4 (Shacks Barn Farm)**

- WNC Highways and National Highways have asked the applicant to do further highway modelling/assessment work.

#### **AL1 (DHL)**

- WNC Highways have asked DHL to run different scenarios through the modelling, to test the cumulative impact.

#### AL1 (Bell Plantation)

- Very little has happened on this application for about 6 months.
- Further transport assessment work ongoing by the applicant.

#### AL2

- WNC Highways have asked the applicant to do further highway modelling/assessment work.

Timescales/Committee dates for all are still unknown.

Looking back on two years as a new councillor, I have a number of personal impressions. Formal council meetings are something to be endured rather than enjoyed! The work is done in cabinet, and in committees, particularly Planning where we are learning how to use such teeth as we have, and the Place Scrutiny committee has a specific sub-group to examine operation of the new highways contract. At formal meetings the inter-party game-playing is not something that excites me, but I am generally impressed with the quality and expertise of our portfolio holders particularly in finance, children's services and transport/highways/environment.

We complain about the council being Northampton-centric, but to some extent it's up to us to see that it isn't. Members of the public can address the cabinet at each meeting, as well as full council, so do think about taking up that opportunity, particularly for a student or sixth-former to try their hand at public speaking.

Finally, can I pay tribute to the dedicated work of the Parish Council and all other village organisations represented this evening. The work may not be glamorous but is invaluable to village life – as Churchill used to say, keep plodding on! (But he didn't say 'plodding').